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## Noynoy Aquino: A Philippine Nixon?

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Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III was elected president of the Republic of the Philippines on May 10, 2010. He will assume office on July 1 with an illustrious name and lineage, drawing memories to his martyred father Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. and his revered mother, former president Corazon “Cory” Aquino. As such, he assumes his father’s shattered legacy, cut short by President Marcos on the tarmac of the Manila airport that now bears his name.

Noynoy becomes president of a country beset by problems. The Philippines, once the favored leader of Southeast Asia, with the best education, highly qualified engineers and technicians, and an unparalleled lead in English language skills, has become the “sick man of Asia,” behind other countries previously at the bottom of the heap. The nation’s major export now is its people—skilled, English-speaking, and hard working. Filipinos are found in nearly every corner of the globe, doing well, providing much needed services and expertise, and most critically, remitting billions of dollars annually to keep their homeland afloat economically.

How was Noynoy elected? His 12-year career in the Philippine Congress and Senate gave him visibility if not distinction, as he is not known for legislative initiatives or leadership. Nevertheless, the death of his mother, Cory, last year revived long suppressed national emotions associated with his father’s opposition to Marcos’ martial law rule and his mother’s restoration of democratic institutions in 1986. While his main opponent in the presidential election, Emmanuel Villar, used his personal wealth to run a modern campaign, Noynoy emphasized his family name to attract popular support, winning with 42 percent of the vote. Villar finished third, behind former president Joseph “Erap” Ejercito Estrada who received over 26 percent and whose running mate Jejomar “Jojo” Binay equaled Noynoy’s percentage to become the vice president-elect of the Philippines. Despite Binay’s tainted reputation, he may be able to serve as a channel to the masses that supported Estrada.

Many observers are skeptical of Noynoy’s capabilities and vision. As the scion of a wealthy, landed aristocracy from Tarlac Province, he is considered to be even less likely than his mother to counter the stranglehold elites have over the economy and land. Without demonstrated executive or policy experience, many believe he will have to depend on the usual stable of elite technocrats who have set and implemented policy for decades. They will not be radicals seeking to overturn past policies.

There is hope, however, that Noynoy may have inherited some of his father’s dynamism and freethinking. Benigno Aquino, Jr. was an exciting and inspiring politician who became the nemesis of President Ferdinand Marcos. After Ninoy’s assassination in 1983 upon his return to the Philippines from exile in the United States at the age of 51—one year older than Noynoy is today—his wife Cory, Noynoy’s mother, led the opposition to Marcos’ continued martial law rule, succeeding in dethroning Marcos and his wife Imelda in 1986.

**Eugene Martin, former U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission to the Philippines, argues that just as Nixon broke barriers to establish contact with China, Philippine president-elect Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino could honor his martyred father by reforming the nation’s elite-controlled political system despite his family background.**



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Could Noynoy surprise everyone and adopt policies to reverse the malaise and give the long-suffering Filipino people better governance and justice? It will not be easy, as the entrenched elite interests will oppose any attempt to reduce their prerogatives to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority. However, the strong showing by disgraced former president Estrada and “Jojo” Binay’s winning the vice presidential position reveals a popular desire for a greater voice in public policy.

The massive corruption and diversion of resources to private interests leave little for the common welfare. Lack of transparent public investment in infrastructure, education, health, or the provision of social justice and responsive governance generates pessimism, social instability, and violence throughout the nation. The continued low-intensity insurgency of the communist New People’s Army (NPA) reveals the government’s failure to meet public expectations. The inability (or unwillingness) of the elites to conclude a just peace agreement with the Islamic Moro minority in the south continues to sap resources better devoted to improving the lives of common citizens.

One thinks back to the surprise Richard Nixon sprang on the United States when he opened the door to relations with the People’s Republic of China. His personal and political persona as a hardline anti-communist made him one of the least likely politicians to break down the 20-year-old cold war walls between the United States and China. However, sometimes those with established credentials in one camp are better able to build the bridge to a better future. Is the inexperienced, essentially unknown new president-elect of the Philippines capable of breaking with his landowning plantation past to turn the country around and revive its unfulfilled promise?

Noynoy Aquino will face many challenges even from the people who would most benefit from a more socially responsible government. Not least is the fractious nature of Philippine society and body politic, divided by an island and family or clan mentality. Lack of a national identity makes it difficult for any leader to build a dominant majority in congress or the public arena to carry out revolutionary policies. Provincial and local power holders are able to manipulate politics and economics to their advantage, leaving the people obligated to them for public services. Absence of an honest, transparent justice system forces victims to rely on corrupt public servants or to take the law into their own hands. As a result, few are willing to invest in productive work or self-improvement, seeking instead to migrate abroad to provide for their families.

Developments in other Southeast Asian countries are not much noted in the Philippines, but the recent struggle in Thailand between the Bangkok elites and rural activists could resonate domestically in the Philippines. Although the communist party’s long rebellion in the Philippines has failed to shake the oligarchs’ hold on power or broaden the political base, the rural and urban poor could seek to mobilize to advance its interests. There are reports of a growing sense within the Armed Forces of the Philippines—most of which soldiers come from the lower-class *massa*—that they continue to be used by the elites for personal ends with little benefit to the poor and powerless.

Noynoy Aquino has shown little evidence of having the intellectual or personal fortitude to assume a role like Nixon’s. Nixon of course had Henry Kissinger as his advisor on foreign policy, and China specifically, and the reasons for their approach to Beijing had more to do with the Soviet Union than a need to accept China’s existence. Would that Noynoy could find a Filipino Kissinger to persuade him that by opposing his family and class he could redeem his family’s and father’s name and reputation as the president who makes the Philippines the great nation it can be.

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